



Ihor Ševčenko

10 February 1922 – 26 December 2009

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Ihor Ševčenko was a man of many attainments, a cultural historian of remarkably wide learning: a Byzantinist, a Slavacist, a classical scholar, a paleographer, an epigraphist and a gifted linguist, all in addition to being a keen angler. Perhaps he could best be described as a cultural historian. Born of Ukrainian parents in the village of Radosc in east-central Poland, Ihor Ivanovič Ševčenko attended the Adam Mickiewicz Classical Gymnasium in Warsaw, where he acquired a sound grounding in Greek and Latin. He continued his studies at the Charles University of Prague, winning his first doctorate (in classical philology) in 1945.

A refugee at the end of the war, he moved to Belgium and enrolled in the University of Louvain where, in 1949, he was awarded his second doctorate, this time on a recondite topic of Byzantine intellectual history. His thesis, covering what was at the time new ground, was eventually published in 1962 under the title *Études sur la polémique entre Théodore Métochite et Nicéphore Choumnos*. The high point of his Belgian years was his participation in the lively seminar conducted at Brussels by Henri Grégoire, the doyen of Byzantine studies, whom he came to regard as his master.

It was thanks to Dumbarton Oaks that Ihor's next move was to the United States. The Seventh International Congress of Byzantine Studies had taken place in 1948 in two venues, Paris and Brussels. Ihor delivered a paper at the Brussels session ("Léon Bardalès et les Juges Généraux") and attracted the favourable attention of Peter Topping, Milton Anastos,

and Sirarpie Der Nersessian, all of whom happened to be in attendance. Topping suggested that he apply to Dumbarton Oaks for a visiting Fellowship, which he did and was appointed for the academic year 1949–50.

At Dumbarton Oaks Ihor found himself in surroundings that were partly familiar, partly novel and puzzling. The familiar side was made up of other European, largely Slavic émigrés: Father Francis Dvornik, Alexander Vasiliev, André Grabar (Visiting Scholar that year), and the charming Nathalie Scheffer (ex-princess Volkonskaia), who was in charge of Slavonic books. The unfamiliar side, for which Ihor's previous experience had not prepared him, was the American side, above all the foundress, Mrs. Bliss, and the Director, Jack Thacher. Mrs. Bliss was still very much in evidence, presiding over the tea ritual every afternoon, and she expected her scholarly acolytes to make interesting conversation. Jack Thacher, who enjoyed Mrs. Bliss's unqualified support, was a complete mystery. Not himself a scholar, as he was proud to admit, he was a man of wealth and refined taste who seemed to lack any serious objective, yet kept the resident scholars on a tight leash. In short, Ihor found himself not so much in a research centre, as he had expected, as in a minor princely court of the eighteenth century—or rather an uneasy mix of the two.

Dumbarton Oaks in those days—I arrived two years after Ihor—was an informal institution administered by a single person, the super-efficient Miss Carpenter. There was a librarian, a curator of the

Byzantine Collection, and a chatty receptionist at the front door. The library was quite small, but growing apace thanks to the compulsive bibliophilia of Milton Anastos. There was also a part-time Director of Studies in the person of Albert Friend, Professor of Art History at Princeton, a western medievalist involved at the time in a study of the Church of the Holy Apostles at Constantinople. It was Friend who brought in the group of scholars—Glanville Downey, Paul Underwood, Milton Anastos—who were to help with the Holy Apostles project, and these men were later to make up the core of the resident faculty. One may assume that Mrs. Bliss approved or, at any rate, did not disapprove of this arrangement. As to her own preferences, she made it clear that she was opposed to German-style scholarship, while admiring the French school as exemplified by Henri Focillon. She would not allow any instruction, i.e., teaching, in the institution, as she stated explicitly in her will. That still left a large area of uncertainty. Was Dumbarton Oaks primarily a research centre with a staff of resident scholars who did not engage in teaching and eschewed German methods or was it mainly a museum of beautiful and rare objects with some scholarly back-up? Ihor, with his European experience, may be forgiven for being confused. He remained confused on this score for many years to come.

For reasons unknown Ihor's fellowship at Dumbarton Oaks was not renewed, though Jack Thacher, thanks to his friends in government, was able to obtain for him a permanent United States visa. Further help in the form of an instructorship at the University of California was due to the initiative of Ernst Kantorowicz, who had bravely resigned from that institution after refusing to sign the infamous Oath of Loyalty. Ihor remained only one year in that job and was back in Washington as Ford Foundation Fellow (1951–52) and able to use the Dumbarton Oaks library. That, if I am not mistaken, was when the two of us first met. All I remember is that we sat in the oak-panelled study and Ihor said to me—he usually addressed me in Russian—*mne nadoeli moi igruški* (I am tired of my toys). He was evidently in rather low spirits at the time.

Ihor's next spell at Dumbarton Oaks was in the spring semester of 1960, by which time he was already a Professor at Columbia. He was invited to take part in a symposium, directed by Paul Underwood, on the Kariye Camii and delivered a memorable paper about Theodore Metochites (published only in 1975)

in which he traced a psychological portrait of that scholar-statesman. Then, in 1965, he decided to leave Columbia, where he felt very much at home—he described it as a suburb of Warsaw—and moved to Dumbarton Oaks as Professor of Byzantine History and Literature. Following the retirement of Ernst Kitzinger and the death of Romilly Jenkins in 1969, Ihor was named Director of Studies. Straightaway he attempted radical reform which he detailed in a memorandum to President Pusey of Harvard. He proposed that the Byzantine operation at Dumbarton Oaks should be self-governing and control its own budget; that the scholarly staff be enlarged by the addition of one Islamicist and one western medieval historian; that the chairmanship of this body should rotate as was the case with other Harvard institutes. He saw the most promising areas of future expansion of the discipline as lying, on the one hand, in the edition of texts and, on the other, in archaeology, especially on the territory of Turkey, and advocated both the setting up of collective projects, including a Byzantine encyclopedia, and a leading role in the *Corpus fontium historiae byzantinae*. It all sounded very logical, but took no account of realities on the ground. Ihor's memorandum was turned down, whereupon he resigned the Directorship of Studies. One cannot help thinking that had he shown more patience and tact, he might have achieved at least some of his objectives. As it happened, beyond the edition of a few texts, only the Byzantine encyclopedia came into being, and this only much later, thanks to the initiative of another East European émigré, Alexander Kazhdan.

Though the next few years witnessed many profound changes at Dumbarton Oaks, and were difficult for Ihor, he stayed on until he moved to Harvard in 1973, contributing greatly to the intellectual life of the institute and encouraging the informal exchange of views at the weekly receptions he and his wife Nancy held in their home on "S" Street.

Ihor's activity at Dumbarton Oaks is represented by the remarkable series of studies he contributed to *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, starting with the edition of Nicolas Cabasilas' allegedly anti-Zealot Discourse (1957) and its two sequels, going on to "The Decline of Byzantium Seen through the Eyes of its Intellectuals" (1961), "The Illuminations of the Menologium of Basil II" (1962), the poems in the Madrid manuscript of Scylitzes (1969–70), and especially what is generally

considered his masterpiece, namely his demolition of the Fragments of Toparcha Gothicus (1971).

A complete bibliography of his publications lists more than 200 titles, starting with a Ukrainian translation of George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1947). Many of his scattered articles, some of them very substantial, have been collected in four volumes devoted in large part to two broad subjects: the intellectual history of Byzantium and its impact on the eastern Slavs. As happens to most perfectionists, Ševčenko did not live to complete all the projects he had in mind, but his critical edition of the highly important *Life* of the Byzantine Emperor Basil I (867–886) ascribed to Constantine Porphyrogenitus is ready for the printer and promises to become a model of its kind.

Ihor received many distinctions, including numerous honorary doctorates, and Festschriften on his sixtieth and eightieth birthdays. He was a member of a dozen academies, including the British Academy (corresponding Fellow), and was from 1986 to 1996 president of the

Association Internationale des Études Byzantines, in which capacity he presided over the memorable international congress held at Moscow (1991), which happened to coincide with the coup attempt against Mikhail Gorbachev. A man of commanding presence and outgoing personality, Ihor had a wide circle of friends both in Europe and North America with whom he communicated in French, German, Italian, Russian, Polish, Czech, modern Greek, and occasionally Latin. At Harvard, where he transferred as Dumbarton Oaks Professor of Byzantine History and Literature, he was closely involved in the establishment of the Ukrainian Research Institute in 1973. He remained associate director until 1989, and taught for twenty years until his retirement, in 1992. He made high demands on his graduate students, but obtained superb results from the few who satisfied his expectations. Four of these students, and the present director of the Institute, came together at Dumbarton Oaks to honor him with a day of lectures on 26 February 2011.